Dr. Singer

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE
NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH
BETHESDA, MARYLAND 20014

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Daniel E. Koshland, Jr., Ph.D.
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Dear Dan:

Title? Following your call today regarding the proposed Academy Forum on "Plasmid Engineering," I have mused further on its implications.

It is extremely important that this meeting be structured with several things in mind. First is the historical role of the Academy in the controversy over recombinant DNA research. This includes the recommendations of an NAS Committee in 1974 to: (1) defer certain experiments for the time being, (2) ask NIH to develop guidelines, and (3) hold an international conference on the subject. Having sponsored the Asilomar Meeting, NAS then approved and recommended the temporary guidelines which resulted.

discuss controversial aspects of guidelines 1) Ecoli 2) SV40 3) Euk-prok. Second, there are the substantial developments which have occurred in the past year. These include: (1) issuance of the NIH guidelines which succeed those of Asilomar and which have been forwarded to the Academy with a request that they be considered and endorsed by NAS, (2) steps taken by NIH to foster greater awareness of the implications of these guidelines by other government agencies, the private sector of research and development, and by the general public, (3) the Cambridge City Council hearings, and (4) a considerable rash of comments, letters, and articles in the scientific and public media. Within the next several weeks, NIH will also publish a compendium of background material and public commentary relevant to its guidelines. We expect our environmental impact statement on the guidelines will appear in the Federal Register of September 2. A decision on patent policy concerning recombinant DNA will follow, probably in early October. During September and October, an interagency committee will develop recommendations for control of DNA research throughout the Federal Government and throughout the nation. In this same period, Canada, EMBO, and possibly WHO and ICSU will also have made recommendations.

Appropriate extension of guidelines to private sector

Appraisal • useful place for public input (history, commentary, future) Green?

International

Inform-gov't people.
- academy • other scientists

I emphasize these developments because they all represent official actions in regard to recombinant DNA which have been, and still are, matters requiring full public awareness and debate. They offer substantive issues about which further exposition and debate can be structured and thus opportunity for elevating discussion above the plane of personal prejudice and passions where much of the discourse on plasmid engineering unfortunately continues.

Third, there is the essentiality that the Forum provide greater evidence of competence to achieve effective debate on delicate scientific questions. The exercise on Human Experimentation, despite our hopes, failed to do this, and we have to improve upon this example. On the topic under consideration the Academy can create a public platform different from those used by NIH to evaluate the measures evolving to contend with recombinant research. This discussion, held on non-governmental territory, can be beneficial to all concerned.

I stress, then, that events have moved far beyond the speculative days of Asilomar. Reasoned critique of these latter day actions are needed--outside the government, as well as within. The debaters must be held responsible for making an informed analysis of these events. If this is so, the process can be enormously helpful. The mere provision of another stage for reiteration of adversary, personal speculations upon the benefits and hazards of plasmid engineering will be destructive of public opinion of the possibilities for rational internal and external governance of science.

I have several thoughts about details. If you accept that the participants (who should include other than those of us in daily confrontation with this problem) must be highly informed, time is critical. A later date for the Forum would be advisable. You should carefully consider alternatives, such as a date in February, which is the anniversary month of both the Asilomar and the NIH DAC meetings. The virtue inherent in an ideally prepared Forum outweighs serving a preconceived schedule that forces premature development of so difficult a topic.

Finally, I also believe it quite unwise to propose anything but a competely open meeting. Closure cannot be justified, given the nature of this subject. The main purpose should be to offer opportunity for public airing of the complicated matters involved.

Recombinant DNA is no longer a field for practice scrimmage. None of us, including the Academy, can afford to fumble. Although I cannot make your early September meeting, I understand that Maxine Singer will be there and I hope Joe Perpich will be able to come, too. Certainly we will cooperate fully with you, provide background information for all participants and otherwise be as helpful as we can.

Best wishes,

Sincerely,

Donald S. Fredrickson, M.D.

cc: Dr. Perpich
Dr. Singer
Dr. Robert White